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Accommodating learners with dyslexia in ELT in Sri Lanka: Teachers' knowledge, attitudes and challenges

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ACCOMMODATING LEARNERS WITH DYSLEXIA IN ELT IN SRI LANKA: TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND CHALLENGES

ABSTRACT

As it is estimated that 10% of the world population has dyslexia or related learning difficulties, it is vital for language teachers to have a thorough understanding of such difficulties and of inclusive teaching techniques. It is believed that teacher training can increase teachers' knowledge of dyslexia and inclusion, inculcate positive attitudes among them on inclusion and increase their self-efficacy beliefs. The study discussed in this paper analysed if a teacher training programme aimed at a group of ELT professionals in Sri Lanka could do the same and also the challenges that they would face in introducing inclusive practices into their context. A questionnaire and interview data revealed that the teacher training programme was able to change teachers' negative attitudes towards dyslexia, increase their knowledge of dyslexia and inclusive practices and increase their readiness to implement inclusive classroom techniques. The findings also revealed that institutional barriers such as a rigid examination system and lack of flexibility in the curriculum may hinder how inclusive practices are implemented. In addition, negative socio-cultural ideology and some practical classroom problems may also affect implementation.

INTRODUCTION

All learners are not alike. We come across learners who face numerous biological, emotional, physical, and social challenges that affect their learning. These challenges create an attainment gap between such learners and their peers (OUP, 2018). Due to this, emphasis has been placed upon developing inclusive education agenda. Inclusive education is defined as "recognition of the need to work towards 'schools for all' – institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs" (United Nations Children's Fund, 2011, p. 3). One of the priorities of inclusive education is recognising and accommodating learners with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) in the teaching-learning process.

SpLDs is an umbrella term used to cover learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and ADHD. Among learners with SpLDs, those who are dyslexic face

language-processing problems in both first and additional language learning (Kormos, 2017). Particularly in additional language learning, they show problems in reading comprehension, spelling, phonological awareness, literacy skills and vocabulary acquisition (Kormos & Smith, 2012). Therefore, learners with dyslexia should be taught using inclusive teaching techniques and they should be provided with individual support (Kormos & Nijakowska, 2017). It is estimated that 10% of the world population has dyslexia or related learning difficulties (Kormos & Smith, 2012), which implies that a considerable number of learners in a language classroom may suffer from such difficulties.

As English still is the main international language, millions of learners in the world learn it as a second, foreign or an additional language. Among these, there can be millions of learners with dyslexia, who may be deprived of achieving the desired English language learning goals if their difficulties are not identified and adequate help is not provided to them in the language classroom. Although dyslexia is a common learning difficulty, language teachers seem to have minimal awareness of it (Hayes, 2000). As a result, inclusive language learning techniques may be used only to a very small extent in many English language teaching (ELT) contexts.

Lack of systematic teacher training has been identified as one of the major causes of teachers' lack of awareness on inclusion (Forlin, 2013). Kormos and Nijakowska's (2017) study, based on a massive open online course (MOOC) on dyslexia and foreign language teaching, showed that teacher training can make positive changes in teacher attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs and teacher knowledge of how dyslexic learners can be accommodated in the language teaching process. However, the success of the implementation of inclusive practices may also depend on how teachers can overcome challenges such as negative socio-cultural ideology on SpLDs (Tiwari, Das & Sharma, 2015), lack of resources (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014), and lack of administrative support (Singal & Jeffery, 2011).

Although English language teachers' awareness of dyslexia and inclusive practices, their attitudes towards inclusion and their use of inclusive classroom techniques are important aspects in ELT, such issues have been minimally investigated in ELT research. The study presented in this paper was based on a teacher training programme on dyslexia and inclusive practices aimed at English language teachers, teacher trainers and policy planners in the mainstream education system in Sri Lanka. The feedback that they provided immediately after the teacher training workshops and the data collected from a series of post-workshop interviews conducted two to three months after the workshops were analysed to examine (1) if the teacher training was able to change the participants' attitudes and knowledge on dyslexia and inclusive

practices and as a result if teacher readiness was increased to introduce inclusive practices at classroom level and (2) the challenges that the participants face in accommodating dyslexic learners in their ELT context.

BACKGROUND

Teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards dyslexia and inclusive practices

The attitudes of teachers towards inclusive practices has been recognized as a decisive factor for the successful implementation of such practices in education (Cook, 2002). A study that analysed general education teachers' attitudes towards disabilities and inclusive practices in Sri Lanka revealed that teachers seem to think that learners with disabilities are 'misfits' in mainstream education (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014). Another study conducted in Delhi, India, investigated general education teachers' perceptions and beliefs on inclusion. The findings show that the participant teachers believed that learning difficulties are caused by lack of motivation among learners (Tiwari, el al., 2015). Forlin, Tait, Carroll, and Jobling (1999) argue that such negative attitudes of teachers lead them to having lower expectations of learners with disabilities, which ultimately results in reduced learning opportunities and decreased performance among such learners. For example, Hornstra, Denessen, Bakker, van den Bergh and Voeten (2010) analysed both explicit and implicit attitudes of a group of 30 teachers in the Netherlands on dyslexia and found out that the participants had slightly negative implicit attitudes towards dyslexia. On the occasions that the teachers had negative implicit attitudes, dyslexic students' spelling achievement test scores became lower. Thus, Hornstra et al. argue that teachers' negative attitudes towards dyslexia can affect student performance.

Teachers' negative attitudes towards dyslexia/inclusion seem to be linked to their lack of awareness/knowledge of dyslexia/inclusion. For example, Alawadh's (2016) study on teachers' knowledge of dyslexia in the Arabic context, with the participation of 471 primary school teachers, showed that the participants had limited awareness of dyslexia and were unaware of the benefits of early intervention. This made these teachers feel 'unprepared' to implement inclusive practices. Chitsa and Mpofu's (2016) study in Zimbabwe also revealed that teachers' lack of knowledge of dyslexia hinders the provision of appropriate support to dyslexic learners. Based on a study conducted in the UK with the participation of 30 teachers, Taylor and Coyne

(2014) highlight that teachers who had knowledge of dyslexia showed a much more positive attitude towards children with dyslexia.

Richards (2012, p. 46) identifies teachers' content knowledge as one of the key dimensions of "expert teaching competence and performance in language teaching". Content knowledge includes knowledge of areas such as linguistic theories, history of language teaching, psycholinguistics and critical pedagogy as well as pedagogical content knowledge, i.e. knowledge of how to teach a language (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Such knowledge is important to create the disciplinary identity of the teacher and it provides them with membership of the profession (ibid). This highlights that content knowledge plays a key role in teachers' confidence in what they teach and how they teach it. As SpLDs and inclusive practices cover a wide range of theoretical concepts, teachers' confidence in the application of inclusive practices may depend on their content knowledge of this topic. Teachers' lack of awareness of dyslexia and lack of confidence in implementing inclusive practices may thus be related to this lack of content knowledge of SpLDs among them.

As Pennington and Richards (2016) highlight, teachers gain content knowledge through formal education courses and training. However, it is apparent that there is a lack of training opportunities available for teachers to prepare them for accommodating learners with SpLDs in the classroom (e.g., Alawadh, 2016 and Chitsa & Mpofu, 2016). Martan, Mihić and Matošević (2017) analyzed 233 Croatian teachers' attitudes towards dyslexia and they found that teachers who were trained in inclusive practices had significantly more positive attitudes than those who did not receive training. Gwernan-Jones and Burden's (2009) study, based in England, used 480 primary and secondary teachers who were on a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course to analyze participants' attitudes towards dyslexia before and after the course. The findings showed that there was a significant change in attitude scores after training. Such empirical evidence indicates that teacher training is able to inculcate more positive attitudes towards dyslexia among teachers. Teacher training also seems to give teachers some confidence to accommodate learners with SpLDs in mainstream classrooms. A study by Kormos and Nijakowska (2017) on teachers' readiness to introduce inclusive practices when teaching foreign languages to learners with dyslexia shows that teacher training could increase confidence among teachers in introducing inclusive practices. It also shows that teachers' increased knowledge on inclusion gained through teacher training is positively related to their self-efficacy beliefs. When teachers have a higher level of self-efficacy in accommodating learners with dyslexia, they are also more willing to incorporate new techniques to meet learner needs (Burden & Jones, 2009).

Peebles and Mendaglio (2014) emphasise that training on inclusive education may change the attitudes of teachers; however, it does not change teachers' perception of their preparedness to implement inclusive practices. They note that the problem lies in theory-based training with little emphasis on practical exposure. For example, three studies (Fayez, Dababneh & Jumiaan, 2011; Hodkinson, 2006 and McCray & McHatton, 2011) highlight that teachers had a narrow understanding of the practical application of inclusive practices in courses that discussed theoretical aspects of inclusion although the courses were able to foster positive attitudes towards inclusion among teachers. Some empirical studies based on practical exposure to inclusive practices provided for teachers show that such exposure is able to significantly change their attitudes towards inclusion (Lambe, 2007 and Swain, Nordness, & Leader- Janssen, 2012).

The discussion so far has shown that teacher's awareness of and positive attitudes towards SpLDs and inclusion is very important in implementing relevant inclusive practices in an education system. Teacher training seems to help raise teachers' awareness of SpLDs and inculcate positive attitudes among them on inclusion. However, most studies discussed above are based on teachers teaching various subjects, not particularly English language teachers. Although teachers' awareness of dyslexia is vital in English language teaching, studies relating to English language teachers' knowledge and attitudes on dyslexia and on how teacher training programmes aimed at English language teachers could change their attitudes towards dyslexia and inclusive practices are scarce. To my knowledge, only Kormos and Nijakowska's (2017) study has analysed English language teachers' attitudinal changes and increased self-efficacy beliefs based on a teacher education programme. In addition to English language teachers, their study included modern foreign language teachers. The participants were also from various backgrounds including those who teach English/other languages as a second/additional language and those who teach in primary, secondary and higher education contexts. The participants were also from various countries representing all continents. Due to such variations, it is difficult to analyse the impact of the training exclusively in the ELT field. The current study thus fulfils this gap by analysing the ability of a teacher training programme to change the attitudes and knowledge of a group of English language teachers on dyslexia and inclusive practices.

Challenges in implementing inclusive practices

When inclusive practices are introduced into an education system, several factors may determine how such practices are implemented. Among them, poor collaboration among professionals within an education system has been considered influential (Alur & Timmons, 2009). These professionals are based at different levels of education management and are responsible for taking decisions at their respective levels. According to Bolitho's (2012) classification, there are four levels of education management: national, regional, institutional and classroom. The national level comprises policy planners, curriculum designers, language test designers and materials developers. The regional level includes regional managers, teacher education institutes and teacher trainers. The institutional level is where the teachers work, i.e. schools and colleges. The bottom level, which is the classroom level, is comprised of teachers. Although vital, building collaboration among professionals in these different levels of education management can be challenging mainly due to poor communication and lack of mutual trust between professionals in these different levels (Carless, 2013). This might affect how changes are implemented within an education system.

Another challenge is the lack of teacher ownership of the proposed change/s. Ownership is the "acceptancy by users of responsibility for implementing, sustaining and further developing a personally meaningful version of the innovation" (Waters & Vilches, 2001, p.137). Teachers seem to be affected most by lack of ownership because of the lack of opportunities that they receive to fully participate in the policy designing of educational changes (Smit, 2003). In addition, lack of content knowledge of the topic (Pennington & Richards, 2016) may also affect their sense of ownership. Lack of understanding of the change and fear of change, particularly in contexts where there is a "teaching to the test" curriculum, also prevent teachers from applying the expected changes (Murray & Christison, 2012, p. 71). In other words, when educational changes are not compatible with the contents of the tests that learners have to take, teachers are reluctant to apply such changes.

Encouraging the reinvention of changes introduced can also be challenging. Reinvention is "the degree to which an innovation is changed by the adopter in the process of adoption and implementation after its original development" (Rice & Rogers, 1980, p. 500-501). This highlights the importance of teachers developing their own contextually relevant and meaningful version of the changes introduced (Waters & Vilches, 2001). These individual adaptations are governed by the type of training provided as well as other contextual factors such as time pressure, exam requirements, resources, cultural norms and lack of school support

(Carless, 2013). If the context allows teachers to easily and quickly put the changes into practice, such changes are highly likely to bring positive impacts (Pennington & Richards, 2016). However, if contextually relevant adaptations are not made, the changes introduced might be unsuccessful.

Sociocultural ideology towards inclusion can also bring challenges to how inclusive practices are incorporated into an education system. In the medical or the individual model of disability, the responsibility for receiving education is placed upon individuals with disabilities (Croft, 2013). They are expected to integrate into mainstream classrooms and find their own ways to obtain education through special education services. In contrast to this, the social model emphasises the importance of recognising the needs of disabled individuals. Responsibility for this is placed upon social institutions to make sure that disabled individuals have access to such services. The social model thus identifies the importance of full societal participation in accommodating people with disabilities. Although certain societies have adopted the social model, there are some contexts that have not fully adopted this model. Thus, negative attitudes still prevail towards disabilities and inclusion in many societies which is a major barrier for inclusive education (Tiwari et al., 2015). As a result, educational institutions such as schools may not recognise their responsibilities in making the learning environment more inclusive.

In addition, parents' lack of awareness of inclusion (Scorgie, 2015), large classes with a low teacher-student ratio (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014 and Yada & Savolainen, 2017), lack of specific materials/tools (Alur & Timmons, 2009; Bhatnagar & Das, 2014 and Yada & Savolainen, 2017), lack of technology (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014), lack of administrative support (Singal & Jeffery, 2011) and rigid examination systems (Tiwari et al., 2015) have been identified as some other factors that influence the implementation of inclusive practices. These findings come from a range of contexts including Asia and Europe and various teacher groups including primary teachers and secondary teachers. There has been no study that analysed if English language teachers face similar challenges when introducing inclusive classroom techniques and thus the current study aims to analyse if such factors exist in an ELT context as well.

The study

The study reported in this paper was based on a teacher training programme on dyslexia and inclusive practices aimed at English language teachers in the mainstream education system

in Sri Lanka. The programme trained a group of English language teachers, teacher trainers and policy planners. In this paper, I present the analysis of programme feedback collected from the participants through a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. This includes feedback from participants at three levels of education management (national, regional, and classroom). The analysis reflects the attitudinal and knowledge changes made by the teacher training programme among participants on dyslexia and inclusive practices. It also shows if the training was able to bring changes to teacher readiness in implementing inclusive practices and also highlights the challenges identified by participants at different levels of education management in implementing inclusive practices. The study attempted to answer the following research questions (RQs).

RQ1: What attitudinal and knowledge changes in dyslexia and inclusive practices were made by the teacher training programme among ELT professionals within the mainstream education system in Sri Lanka?

RQ2: What are the main challenges faced by participants at different levels of education management in implementing inclusive practices in the ELT field within the mainstream education system in Sri Lanka?

METHODOLOGY

Context

English has the status of the main second language in Sri Lanka and it also enjoys high prestige in terms of securing private sector jobs and higher education opportunities. Thus, it is taught in all schools in Sri Lanka from primary grades through to university entrance. Although English is treated as one of the most important subjects in the school curriculum, student performance in the major national examination is poor (Perera, 2010). There are several reasons behind this poor performance. Limited facilities and unequal resource allocation (Hettiarachchi, 2013) and low-quality teacher training (Wijesinghe, 2014) are the most important issues. Dissemination of cutting-edge research findings to teachers is also limited. In addition to these issues, learners with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) such as dyslexia are neglected in the teaching/learning process in Sri Lanka. None of the pre- or in-service English teacher training programmes sufficiently addresses SpLDs in their curricula.

The study took place within the framework of a teacher training programme on the inclusion of learners with dyslexia in teaching English in Sri Lanka. This teacher training programme comprised a series of workshops for English language teacher trainers and a sample of English language teachers. In addition, an awareness- raising workshop for policy planners, curriculum developers, textbook writers and language testers was also conducted. There were six two-day workshops for teacher trainers and six one-day workshops for teachers. The awareness-raising workshop was also one day in duration. The workshops were aimed at teacher trainers and teachers covered the main features of dyslexia; identifying dyslexic learners in class, inclusive classroom techniques; the Multi-sensory Structured Language Teaching approach (MSLT)[1] and its application in teaching language skills and systems; and assessing learners with dyslexia. The content of the workshop for national level stakeholders included dyslexia and its influence on language teaching; curriculum/materials design; and assessing dyslexic learners. The workshop materials were developed based on DysTEFL project materials (Dystefl, 2017) and several books and research articles written on teaching languages to dyslexic learners (e.g. Kormos & Smith, 2012). A set of language-independent dyslexia identification tests developed by ELT well (ELT well, 2017) was also used in the workshops. The materials were adapted to suit the Sri Lankan context. For example, alternative methods were used in tasks that needed technological devices because most mainstream schools in Sri Lanka minimally have such resources. The texts (e.g. Dyslexia Factsheet) used in the workshops were simplified to suit the English language proficiency level of teachers in Sri Lanka.

When introducing a new concept/change into an education system, it is possible to either use a top-down approach, i.e., starting from the national level and going down to the classroom level, or a bottom-up approach where changes are first introduced at classroom level and reach national level at the end. However, Bolitho (2012) argues that both bottom-up and top-down processes of introducing ELT changes are unsuccessful as the changes become "diluted or distorted" with time before they reach all these levels (p. 42). Therefore, he emphasises the importance of approaching all these levels simultaneously when an ELT change is introduced in order to strengthen the collaboration among professionals in these levels for the successful implementation of change. When designing the teacher training project, this was taken into account. In order to minimise the risk of changes becoming "diluted or distorted",

[1] Current ELT teacher education programmes in Sri Lanka do not discuss how to use MSLT approach in ELT. Therefore, this is relatively a new technique introduced in this programme.

three main levels of education management, that is, teachers (classroom level), teacher trainers (regional level) and policy planners (national level) were approached simultaneously.

Participants

One hundred teacher trainers, covering all 25 districts of the country, took part in the two-day workshops. They each had had more than 10 years of English language teaching experience in several teaching contexts and had at least five years of teacher training experience. These trainers came from different teacher training organisations. Sixty-five percent of them were based at Regional English Support Centres (RESCs), which form a network of 31 training centres established in the country to provide in-service training to English language teachers. Fifteen percent of the teacher trainers were from National Colleges of Education (NCOEs), which provide pre-service teacher training to novice English teachers. The rest were from universities, the British Council, the National Institution of Education (NIE) and Zonal Education Offices. All of them worked within the mainstream education system in Sri Lanka in different capacities.

A hundred and seventy-two teachers took part in the one-day workshops. Among them, 129 teachers belonged to the mainstream schools and had received pre- and in-service teacher training from the above-mentioned training organisations. The others belonged to private institutions or government organisations which function separately from the mainstream education system. The analysis in this study contains the data collected from the teachers only from the mainstream schools (n=129). All 129 participants included in the analysis were teachers of English working at primary and secondary level schools. Among them, 37 came from a rural district in the country and the rest were from urban areas. All of them had had initial pre-service teacher training and their teaching experience ranged from three to 38 years.

Nineteen policy planners, curriculum developers, textbook writers and language testers took part in the national level workshop. They had had more than 15 years of teaching experience and at least 5 years of experience as either curriculum developers, textbook writers, language testers or policy planners. Most of them were based in Colombo, the capital city of the country and were attached to the NIE or Ministry of Education where many policy decisions are taken on the education system of the country. Some of them, that is, the language test developers, were attached to the Department of Examinations in Sri Lanka. At the time the workshop was conducted, a new series of English language textbooks was being developed and the textbook writers who were involved took part in the workshop.

Needs analysis

An initial needs analysis was conducted with a group of teacher trainers before planning the workshop content. A questionnaire was distributed among 10 teacher trainers to understand their existing knowledge of dyslexia and its implications for language teaching. None of the respondents indicated that they had a thorough understanding of dyslexia or its influence on language learning. None of them had received any training/instruction on how to accommodate dyslexic learners in the language classroom.

Instruments

A questionnaire (Appendix A), which contained eight open-ended questions, was used to collect feedback in the workshops conducted for teachers and teacher trainers. The first two questions explored the usefulness of the workshop and the second two were aimed at analysing if the inclusive practices introduced in the workshops were context-related and if trainees believed that the implementation of inclusive practices in their contexts was possible. The fifth question analysed challenges that trainees perceived themselves to face when implementing inclusive practices. The sixth question enquired about further support necessary. The seventh was about the organisation of the workshop and the last one gave trainees an opportunity to share any thoughts related to the workshop. The questionnaire used in the national level workshop to collect feedback comprised six questions: the first two focused on the usefulness of the workshop, the third on the possibility of making changes in the curriculum, textbooks and language tests, the fourth on challenges and the fifth on further support. The last question allowed the participants to share any other thoughts (Appendix B).

Two to three months after the workshops, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with a group of workshop participants. Eight teacher trainers and 10 teachers were interviewed. Two different sets of questions were used in the interviews. Teacher trainers were asked nine questions (Appendix C) aimed at analysing if they were able to disseminate the knowledge they gained in the workshops and if they had faced any challenges in doing so. It also explored further support that they needed. The eight teacher trainers came from seven different districts in the country, ranging from very rural to most urban. There were eight interview questions aimed at teachers, to analyse if they had been able to implement the inclusive practices introduced in the workshops in their classroom teaching, if they encountered

any problems in doing so and any further support that they required (Appendix D). A textbook writer and a language tester provided written answers to the interview questions since they were not available to take part in the oral interviews.

Procedure

All workshop participants filled in the feedback questionnaire at the end of the workshops. They were not given a time limit and the responses were collected anonymously. 96 teacher trainers, 125 teachers and 15 participants in the national level workshop provided feedback. The handwritten responses were then typed up. A research assistant conducted the semi-structured interviews individually. Each interview took approximately 15 minutes. The participants were directly contacted by phone or email and the interviews were conducted at a convenient time and venue indicated by the participants. Some interviews were conducted over the phone or via Skype due to the difficulty of travelling to different parts of the country where the participants lived. All interviews were conducted in English. The recorded interviews were then transcribed.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach (Bryman, 2012) was used in analysing the data. Using the inductive method of coding, themes were identified from the collected questionnaire responses. NVivo software was used for quote-search (Folkestad, 2008) in identifying themes. As Boyatzis (1998) recommends, emerging themes were compared within sub-samples, in this study, from teachers, teacher trainers and participants from the national level workshop and then with the interview samples.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: What attitudinal and knowledge changes in dyslexia and inclusive practices were made by the teacher training programme among ELT professionals within the mainstream education system in Sri Lanka?

Teacher knowledge

In previous studies, teachers' lack of awareness of inclusive practices has been identified as a major issue in implementing them in the teaching-learning process (e.g. Forlin, 2013). The findings of the current study also revealed that 93 out of 96 teacher trainers who provided feedback (97%) either did not know what dyslexia is or had minimal understanding of how it influences language learning. Among teachers, 118 out of 125 teachers (94%) also stated that they did not have a clear understanding of what dyslexia is. Although none of the 15 national level participants indicated that they did not know about dyslexia; they agreed that they had gained a better understanding of dyslexia and its implications in ELT through the training. This reflects that both pre- and in-service English language teacher education programmes in Sri Lanka do not discuss topics such as dyslexia and inclusive practices sufficiently in their programmes. This is similar to the situation in the Indian (Das, Kuyini & Desai, 2013) and Japanese (Yada & Savolainen, 2017) contexts, where lack of teacher training programmes has resulted in limited teacher knowledge of inclusive practices.

When it comes to analysing how participants' knowledge changed due to training, the questionnaire responses revealed that teacher trainers and teachers developed a better understanding of what dyslexia is and of inclusive practices by participating in the workshops. Eighty-three teacher trainers (86%) and 120 teachers (96%) mentioned that the workshop was able to increase their knowledge on the subject. One teacher summarised what she learned as follows:

1. I learned about dyslexia, how to identify students who are having dyslexia, how to prepare the work tasks for them and how to help them to come out of dyslexia. (T[2]65)

This indicates that this participant had gained an overall understanding on dyslexia and related inclusive teaching techniques that can be used at classroom level.

2. Assuming I have confirmed that I have a student with a learning difference, I can adapt materials - e.g., length of text, presentation, font-size, visual support, density of pics and texts. (TT[3]67)

This extract from a teacher trainer also reflects their understanding of inclusive teaching techniques that can be used in class to help learners with dyslexia.

[2] Teacher
[3] Teacher Trainer

In addition, four participants at the national level workshop mentioned that the training would be useful in curriculum/materials design, two mentioned that it would be useful in language test design and three were confident that they could use the training in their teacher training projects. These findings strengthen the argument that teacher training can increase teachers' content knowledge of inclusive practices (e.g., Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008).

I also analysed participants' readiness to implement inclusive practices to help learners with dyslexia in their contexts. 98% of the teacher trainers and a similar percentage of teachers mentioned that they are able to incorporate inclusive teaching techniques in their teaching. The following extract gives an example of what participants anticipated that they could do at classroom level.

3. Yes, I will pay more attention to them (dyslexic learners). I don't get angry when they have problems in reading and writing. Help them at anytime they want. Give them clear instructions, and let them to have their own time to do the work, ask them to come to me even after the lesson or school to solve their problems. Support them with the techniques I followed. (TT12)

In the post-workshop interviews, teachers gave several examples of how they used the practical teaching techniques that they learned in the workshops. One teacher mentioned:

4. I have two students. I have identified they have the problem.. after the programme only I understood it.. I applied methods flashcards visual aids.. when I applied them, they try to do the tasks with other students.. it took time.. anyhow they did it.. in that class.. usually.. I have changed my routine.. I'm talking to those two students as well.. I'm doing a few activities with them so they are very interested and they are waiting for me.. now I know these two students are waiting for me.. they love to touch those things that I bring. (IT[4]1)

The above interview extract highlights that the participant was able to use some of the inclusive teaching techniques learned in the workshop in her real classroom context. Her experience shows that the techniques that she put into practice were helpful in increasing learner participation in the classroom.

Overall, the findings indicate that the participants had limited awareness of dyslexia before training and the teacher training programme was able to increase their content knowledge on dyslexia and inclusive practices and increase their readiness to implement inclusive teaching techniques at classroom level.

[4] Interview-Teacher

Attitudes

The feedback questionnaire data showed that the attitudes teacher trainers and teachers had about learners with language learning difficulties such as dyslexia before the training were generally negative. This is similar to what Tiwari et al. (2015) reported in the Indian context and confirms Hettiarachchi and Das' (2014) previous findings in the Sri Lankan context. Several participants in the current study commented that they had slow learners and did not know the reasons for them being slow. Twenty-five percent of the whole population (teachers and teacher trainers) mentioned that punishment was used as a remedial method for such learners. The following comments provide evidence for this:

5. This is indeed an eye opener for all of us. We have taken these students for granted. Now I really regret for punishing them. (TT28)
6. This is completely a newest subject to me. I was wondering thinking about how pathetic some situations that we have heard, that in many years back some students were chased away from schools labelling them as totally weak ones with not knowing anything about this. (TT95)

The comments reveal that not only had these teachers held negative attitudes, but also learners who they labelled as 'weak' had faced negative consequences in the form of punishments or negligence as a result of teachers' negative attitudes. This confirms Jussim, Nelson, Manis and Soffin's (1995) finding that negative stereotyping or labelling affects students' performance as well as their finding that learners with learning difficulties are usually rejected in some mainstream education systems. As Forlin et al. (1999) mention, the negative attitudes of these Sri Lankan teachers seem to have resulted in learners with language learning difficulties having fewer learning opportunities as some of them were even prevented from receiving education within the mainstream classes.

The data which emerged from the feedback questionnaire reveal that the attitudes and beliefs of teachers, teacher trainers and policy planners on dyslexia and learning difficulties underwent changes due to the training they received. Particularly, it is evident that the participants understood that all learners in a class are not equal in terms of abilities/skills. For example, the following extract illustrates how this participant had changed her beliefs on children with SpLDs.

7. we have found such children but we thought that they were disabled. Now we have the right picture. [TT73]

Teacher beliefs and attitudes play a key role in how ELT changes are implemented by them (Borg, 2006). Therefore, it is important to inculcate positive attitudes in them towards any new changes proposed. The findings in this study indicate that the participants had negative attitudes towards learning difficulties before training and the training has been able to change these existing attitudes.

RQ2: What are the main challenges faced by participants at different levels of education management in implementing inclusive practices in the ELT field within the mainstream education system in Sri Lanka?

Several themes emerged in the feedback questionnaire that inform different types of challenges that the participants anticipated they would face in implementing the inclusive practices discussed in the training. The main themes are: institutional barriers, negative sociocultural ideology and practical issues related to classroom.

Institutional barriers

The main challenge that 80% of the teachers and teacher trainers mentioned was institutional barriers. They find it challenging to pay attention to the individual needs of the students in class as teachers are pressurised to finish teaching the curriculum on time. The emphasis is on the quantity of the materials covered, not the quality of learning. The following comment summarises the situation.

8. In the government system, main issue is time and sticking rigidly to the syllabus to cover everything required. This does not allow the flexibility to teachers to integrate a lot of the techniques intentionally. Quantity not quality of learning seems upper most and it should be the other way round. (TT65)

As a result of this expectation, 40% of the teachers mentioned that the time allocated for them to teach English is insufficient if classroom changes are to be implemented. In addition, the quality of textbooks, which are rigid with a limited scope to accommodate dyslexic learners, was also identified as another challenge as teachers are expected to teach the textbook.

The rigid testing system in the country also contributes to this. The students in Sri Lankan public schools are ultimately expected to take the General Certificate of Education – Ordinary Level (GCE O/L) examination in Grade 11. Teachers are expected to prepare students for it. The English language test paper itself in this examination is not dyslexic-friendly, and teachers

are unable to make changes to the content of this national examination. The following extract reveals the difficulty of teachers.

9. In testing techniques, if we happen to be fair to the dyslexic learners there might be some problems from the other learners, public and the higher officials when setting papers, administration as well as relevant authorities expect the traditional things. There can be possibilities where they reject the changes. (TT18)

As the above extract shows, changing the testing system is very challenging in a test-driven education system because other learners and parents also have concerns over the examinations. Thus, the fear of change in a "teaching to the test" context (Murray & Christison, 2012, p. 71) was clearly visible on this occasion.

Teachers' fears can be taken into consideration when taking policy decisions at national level. Those who are engaged in language test construction at national level (participants from national level workshop) were of the view that there could be practical problems in changing the standard examinations because there is no standard system in the country to identify dyslexic learners. They further noted that there could be misunderstandings and confusions about national exams if dyslexic learners are accommodated, as the general public does not have an understanding of learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Some of the participants also highlighted the lack of expertise among themselves that prevent them from incorporating inclusive practices into the curriculum and the testing system.

Negative sociocultural ideology

As in many other contexts where inclusive practices were introduced (e.g. Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Scorgie, 2015), another main theme that appeared in the data analysis under 'challenges' is negative sociocultural ideology. Forty-nine percent of the teacher trainers and teachers mentioned that the attitudes of their colleagues may affect the application of inclusive practices at the institutional level. Particularly because of the lack of awareness of other teachers as well as the institutional hierarchy (e.g. school principals) of inclusive educational practices, the participants in the study anticipated challenges in changing their teaching methods. Not only the attitudes of co-workers, but also the attitudes of learners with learning difficulties and their parents might be a problem. One said:

10. In [the] Sri Lankan context pupils don't like to tell openly that they have this problem. Parents too are reluctant to agree with such kind of idea regarding their children. (TT83)

In addition, this lack of awareness leads to other students and their parents questioning the additional support provided to learners with learning difficulties. This confirms Maria's (2013) argument that a strong relationship with the local community is necessary for an inclusive education programme to be successful.

Practical issues

Twenty-nine percent of the participants (both teacher trainers and teachers) mentioned that there might be practical issues when having both dyslexic and non-dyslexic learners in the same class. For example, the teachers fear that classroom management could be problematic when they pay more attention to dyslexic learners. Lack of resources such as classroom space, materials, reference books, financial assistance and continuous training have been recognised as other challenges which are similar to barriers identified in other contexts where inclusive practices were introduced (e.g. Bhatnagar & Das, 2014, Singal & Jeffery, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, teachers' awareness of dyslexia and inclusive practices and their positive attitudes towards inclusion is vital in teaching English as a second, foreign or additional language. The findings of this study highlight that in Sri Lanka where English is one of the prominent subjects in the mainstream curriculum, English language teachers' awareness of dyslexia and inclusive practices is minimal and thus they have negative attitudes towards learners who show language learning difficulties. As in the case of Hornstra et al.'s study, the current study reveals that teachers' negative attitudes towards dyslexia affect student achievement. It also shows that some such learners are even deprived of receiving school education. Similar to Kormos and Nijakowska's (2017) study, the current study reveals that teacher training can inculcate positive attitudes among teachers on dyslexia and inclusive practices in language education. In addition, according to the findings, teacher training can increase teachers' content knowledge on the topic and their confidence in applying inclusive teaching techniques.

When it comes to the challenges anticipated by the participants at different levels of education management, teachers and teacher trainers agree that the rigid education system where teaching the curriculum aiming at a national exam using less flexible textbooks is the main barrier to implementing inclusive practices at the classroom level. Participants at the national level, where the responsibility for the reforms ultimately lies, tend to have a 'fear of change' due to negative sociocultural ideology on inclusive practices in society and lack of

expertise among themselves. One national level participant pointed out that there is "general reluctance to change the system" (TT 78). This seems to be related to not only sociocultural pressures, but also to the lack of power that stakeholders at the national level have in making educational reforms. Eleweke and Rodda (2002) identify the absence of enabling legislation as a major problem in implementing inclusive education in developing countries. The views of the policy planners in the current study seem to reflect the same, as there seem to be concerns among this group of participants over how to introduce changes to the education system to incorporate inclusive practices that fit in with the prevailing legislation. In addition, they did not have any idea of who should take the initiative in changing the existing legislation. Thus, it seems that a more top-down approach with enabling legislation is suitable when introducing inclusive practices to the ELT field in Sri Lanka if sustainable changes are to be made.

CONCLUSION

Identifying learners with language learning difficulties and accommodating such learners in the language classroom is one of the key responsibilities of language teachers. This is particularly important as research has already identified that at least 10% of the population suffer from either dyslexia or related language learning difficulties (Kormos & Smith, 2012). In this context, the current study provides some useful insights into the ELT field on how teacher education courses should be shaped. One of the main findings of the study is that English language teachers have a lack of knowledge on learning difficulties and inclusive language teaching practices. This could be true in many contexts where teacher education courses give less emphasis to this topic. Therefore, it is important that ELT contexts provide teachers with adequate content knowledge on learning difficulties and inclusion. As Borg (2015) mentions this could be done through workshops, courses and similar CPD activities as such training "contribute[s] significantly to the development of English language teachers around the world, at both pre-service and in-service levels" (p. 5).

The study also revealed that what teachers need most in training programmes like this is knowledge of the practical application of the new concepts. If training is impractical, unfeasible and bring minimal impact at classroom level, such concepts are dismissed by teachers (Borg, 2015). Thus, any training on inclusive practices in ELT should aim at showing teachers aspects such as: how to identify learners with learning difficulties and what practical classroom techniques can be used to help such learners. In addition, as Borg mentions, 'contextual alignment' should be taken into consideration when designing training on inclusive

practices as the study findings highlighted that institutional barriers and social and cultural milieu determine how successfully such practices can be implemented at classroom level. In addition, a more top-down approach with enabling legislation may be necessary for an ELT context to fully incorporate inclusive practices within the system.

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